

# THE POLICY WRITING GUIDE

Concise Writing Techniques  
for Policy Analysts

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# The Policy Writing Guide

## Concise Writing Techniques for Policy Analysts

### Introduction

The term “concise writing” is often associated with cutting words or deleting paragraphs from a text. However, concise writing is not about the final word count; it is a writing technique that focuses on deliberate word choices, sentence construction, and grammar. The purpose is to clearly communicate ideas and share substantive information with readers.

When policy analysts write concisely, audiences are more likely to engage with policy recommendations and remember key points. In environments where hundreds of reports, briefing notes, and presentations circulate every day, creating memorable work is essential. Concise writing is a powerful tool that supports this goal.

### What is Concise Writing?

Concise writers are engaging writers. They do not necessarily use the fewest words, but are not verbose. What are the differences between the two? Verbose writing is filled with words that do not add meaning to a sentence, vocabulary that is overly technical or elegant, and redundant phrases. Concise writing selects words with a purpose, cuts unnecessary phrases, and uses vocabulary that is accessible to all audience members.

### Where Should Policy Analysts Begin?

#### *1. Think about the framework for the policy request*

The Executive Council (ECO) created templates for all cabinet submissions (i.e., RFLs, R&Rs, and MECs). These documents provide a standardized framework for policy requests.

Policy analysts should review the templates in detail, as they provide insight into the information needs and interests of decision makers such as the Premier’s Office, Treasury Board, and the Minister.

## *2. Think about the target audience*

All forms of writing have intended audiences. A policy document written for industry stakeholders requires a different level of detail, and perhaps vocabulary, than a briefing note for the Minister. Before beginning the first draft of any policy report, consider the following questions:

- What do readers already know about the topic?
- What new and/or background information do readers need today?
- What questions might readers have after reading the report?
- What will readers do with the information presented in the report?

## *3. Explain one idea at a time*

Audiences read reports one word at a time. It is imperative that the words on the page are clear and make sense. If not, communication is unsuccessful.

Instead of lumping ideas into one paragraph, write short paragraphs that focus on one idea. When multiple ideas are mixed together, readers have to slow down and pull apart sentences to find meaning. This process heightens the risk of confusion and misunderstanding.

Think of each paragraph as a single unit of information. Build many short, concise units. Then, arrange the paragraphs in a logical order that explains the rationale for policy recommendations.

## *4. Edit, edit, edit*

Editing submissions is a difficult process, especially when the research process has taken months or years to complete. There are so many great bits of information to share with readers! However, critically reviewing each sentence and paragraph for relevance and clarity strengthens submissions. If the text does not contribute to the rationale for policy recommendations or provide new information, press the delete button.

## *5. Read paragraphs out loud*

After writing several drafts of a report, it can be hard to see the forest for the trees. Sometimes, it's hard to judge if a paragraph contain unnecessary words or details. When in doubt, read paragraphs out loud. If the wording sounds clunky, readers will stumble over it as well.

## Submission Outlines and Templates

Concise writing begins before words are put on a page. To communicate a clear message to an audience, the writer must craft and understand the message first.

Outlines are one of the most powerful tools in the writer's toolkit. They allow the writer to build a framework, organize information, and insert evidence that supports policy requests.

The [standardized templates](#) for cabinet submissions provide the framework for outlines. Also, policies and procedures for submissions are discussed in the [100 Management Guide](#). The templates and Guide are held as standards for all provincial government departments.

At the time this guide was written, cabinet submissions must contain the following headings:

- Statement of the issue/problem to be addressed
- Summary of the background
- Key issues/challenges
- Financial implications
- Human resources implications
- Information technology implications
- Stakeholder concerns/impact on stakeholders
- Legal/legislative/jurisdictional/environmental ramifications
- Alternatives/options
- Recommended option(s)
- Implementation plan and timelines

The submission templates describe the types of data and evidence that should appear under each heading. For an example, see Figure 1 to view the first page of the *Memorandum to Executive Council* template.

**\*Note:** The *100 Management Guide* and submission templates are periodically updated by the Treasury Board or Executive Council. To view the most recent updates, policy analysts should refer to the online templates.

## Memorandum to the Executive Council



Number:  
Dept.:  
Date:

- Title:** Include a one sentence description of the item being raised or the action proposed.
- Submitted By:** State the name and portfolio of the Minister concerned.
- Prepared By:** Insert the name and title of the person who prepared the request so he/she can be consulted for further information if necessary.
- Reviewed By:** The Director of Finance or senior financial staff who have reviewed the proposal must sign beside his/her name to confirm that he/she has been consulted on the financial implications and funding source.  
  
Indicate any other senior staff who have reviewed the proposal and have him/her sign beside his/her name.
- Deputy Minister:** The deputy minister/deputy head must sign beside his/her name indicating he/she confirms the accuracy of the facts in the submission.

### SUMMARY:

Provide a bullet point summary of the proposal including:

- Objective
- Outcome sought
- Financial impact
- Considerations impacting timing of the decision
- Recommendation

### CURRENT SITUATION AND PURPOSE FOR THIS REQUEST

Describe the reason for this request (objective and outcome sought). This section may vary in length depending on the complexity of the current situation, but should be no longer than a few paragraphs.

Has this matter previously been considered by Executive Council, Treasury and Policy Board or another committee of the Executive Council? If yes, what was the result of the previous consideration and how is this submission different?

### BACKGROUND

In a brief paragraph, provide the 3 most important pieces of background information that have led to the current situation.

### KEY ISSUE

Identify key issues and explain how the submission is consistent with the organization's Business Plan and/or Minister's Mandate Letter.

In some instances there may be only one or two key issues and in other instances there may be several issues. Some of the key issues that may be identified and included in this section may be redundant to some of the other categories identified below. Where appropriate, you may decide to list the issues in this section and indicate that more detail will be included in the sections that follow.

Figure 1: Writing instructions from the [Memorandum to the Executive Council Form Template](#).

## Concise Writing: Craft Sentences and Paragraphs

After policy analysts create outlines and gather evidence to support the policy request, it's time to draft the cabinet submission. Below are several tips that support concise writing techniques.<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Avoid the passive voice

The passive voice is not grammatically incorrect, but it does create wordy sentences. Passive writing may confuse or frustrate readers because the main point gets lost in the weeds.

The difference between a passive and an active voice is sentence structure. In the passive voice, the subject receives the action of the verb.

- **Passive voice:** The committee appointment (*object*) was approved (*passive verb form*) by the Minister (*subject*).

In the active voice, the subject performs the action of the verb.

- **Active voice:** The Minister (*subject*) approved (*active verb form*) the committee appointment (*object*).

The passive voice typically uses forms of the verb “be” (e.g., is, am, are, were, was) instead of action verbs (e.g., approve, submit, write, consult).

- **Passive voice:** The recommendation **is dependent** on the data.
- **Active voice:** The recommendation **depends** on the data.
  
- **Passive voice:** **There is** the possibility of approval of the consultation ahead of time.
- **Active voice:** The ADM may **approve** the consultation ahead of time.

Changing a passive voice to an active voice involves significant edits and rewrites. Think about sentence construction during the first draft, even if it slows down the writing process. It's worth it in the long run!

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<sup>1</sup> The writing tips discussed in this section were adapted from the following writing guides:

1) [Purdue University: Purdue Online Writing Lab](#); 2) [The Writing Center, George Mason University: Writing Concisely](#); 3) [The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill: Writing Concisely](#); 4) [Research Degree Insiders: 10 Tips for More Concise Writing](#); 5) [Stanford Engineering: Stem Style Guide Technical Communication Program](#); 6) [University of Arizona: Writing Clearly and Concisely](#).

## **2. Limit sentences to 40 words**

Long sentences increase the risk of misunderstanding and confusion. Flag any sentence that contains 40+ words. Is it possible to break it into 2 sentences? Writing is more efficient when sentences are compact. Readers also appreciate concise text that is easy to skim and understand.

## **3. Limit paragraphs to 300 words**

Politicians and administrators work under tight deadlines and review multiple submissions at once. Do not expect readers to wade through ambiguous text or read between the lines. Present the policy request in clear language and get to the main point. Write short, compact paragraphs that allow readers to skim documents and understand the rationale for policy recommendations.

Think of each paragraph as a single unit of information. Readers should be able to glance at a paragraph and pull out the main idea in seconds.

Do not pack multiple ideas into one long paragraph. Present each idea as its own unit of information. Then, organize paragraphs so they tell a cohesive, logical story.



## Concise Writing: Review Language Choices

After the first draft of a cabinet submission is together, it's time to work on the first round of edits. At this stage, review language choices. Does the document contain terms that may not be familiar to the audience? Is the meaning of sentences or paragraphs unclear? Use the following tips to review language choices and tighten up paragraphs.<sup>2</sup>

### 1. Start sentences with the subject

The subject tells readers who or what a sentence is about. It is the noun in the sentence that “does” the action of the verb.

- **1<sup>st</sup> Draft:** As I have previously argued, it was not until after the last batch of votes was counted, that the Mayor (*subject*) was able to declare (*verb*) victory.
- **Rewrite:** The Mayor (*subject*) declared (*verb*) victory after the last batch of votes was counted.

### 2. Make deliberate word choices

The words writers choose either enhance or interfere with readers' comprehension. Before using technical terms, professional jargon, or acronyms, make sure the audience will understand this language. When in doubt, define the term the first time it is used in a text using one of these methods:

- **Use a synonym:** “policy impact assessment” instead of “BIA”.
- **Describe the term:** A BIA measures a policy's impact on established business practices.
- **Define the term:** A Business Impact Assessment (BIA) assesses policy proposals for alignment with the Premier's Charter of Governing Principles and estimates the anticipated costs or savings to businesses.

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### 3. Use plain language

Politicians and administrators who read cabinet submissions understand complex vocabulary, but they process plain language more quickly. To enhance readability, replace elegant words with simple language.

Complex Vocabulary	Plain Language
• Utilize	• Use
• Commence	• Begin
• Fabricate	• Build
• Initiate	• Begin

### 4. Replace vague words with specific words

Vague words are abstract and conceal meaning. Specific words are precise and convey meaning. Whenever possible, use specific words and directly tell readers what they need to know.

- **Vague Sentence:** Business and Consumer Services is developing consumer materials (*What materials? Where are they available?*) that allows users to communicate in real time (*How?*).
- **Specific Sentence:** Business and Consumer Services is rolling out a new website dedicated to consumer alerts. Citizens can subscribe to the alert system with an active email address.

### 5. Use the short form of words and phrases

Replace words like “utilize” with “use” or “conceptualize” with “concept”. Avoid using phrases like “on the other hand” or “the ways in which” to connect sentences. Instead, use words like “however” or “how”.

- **1<sup>st</sup> Draft:** The team explained **the ways in which** the program is unique and why it is **utilized** to replace previous initiatives.
- **Rewrite:** The team explained **how** the program is unique and why it is **used** instead of other initiatives.

## 6. Replace roundabout expressions with direct expressions

Roundabout expressions are easy to overlook in the editing process because they are common figures of speech. However, they add extra words without providing additional meaning.

Examples of roundabout expressions include the following:

- At this point in time...
- As you requested...
- On the grounds that...
- In light of the fact that...
- The possibility exists for...
- \_\_\_\_\_ has the capacity for...

Replace roundabout expressions with the following words:

- If
- Because
- How
- When
- Now
- About
- May
- Should
- Must
- Since

- **1<sup>st</sup> Draft:** It is **necessary** that we make a recommendation on this pressing issue.
- **Rewrite:** We **must** make a recommendation on this pressing issue.
  
- **1<sup>st</sup> Draft:** In the **event** of a blizzard, staff **with the capacity** to work from home should.
- **Rewrite:** If there is a blizzard, staff **should** work from home.

## 7. Replace multiple negatives with affirmatives

Multiple negatives muddy the waters. They add unnecessary words to sentences and create confusion. Affirmatives remove extra words and clearly establish meaning.

- **Multiple Negatives:** Your stakeholders **will not appreciate** the information **that lacks** relevance.
  
- **Affirmative:** Your stakeholders **will** appreciate relevant information.

## Concise Writing: The Final Edit

By this point, the cabinet submission has gone through several rewrites. It's time to pull out the fine-tooth comb! Before circulating the document for approvals and signatures, make any final edits that tighten the language and enhance readability.<sup>3</sup>

### 1. Eliminate unnecessary words

Unnecessary words add one or two words per sentence. This may not seem like much, but the word count adds up!

Unnecessary words include the following:

- Actually
  - Really
  - Basically
  - Very
  - Definitely
  - Practically
  - Extremely
  - Somewhat
- **1<sup>st</sup> Draft:** **Basically**, the first database surpassed the second one in **overall** performance.
  - **Rewrite:** The first database performed better than the second.

### 2. Eliminate excessive detail

When removing extra words, also edit for excessive details. Too much information conceals meaning and frustrates readers, especially when they skim submissions for take-away points.

- **1<sup>st</sup> Draft:** I received **and read** the email you **sent yesterday** about the report **you're writing** for the project. I agree it needs a **thorough, close** edit from someone **familiar with your audience**.
- **Rewrite:** I received your email about the project report and agree it needs an edit from an expert.

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### 3. Cut redundant pairs

Redundant pairs are two words side-by-side that have the same meaning. They add unnecessary words and affect the readability of the document. Examples of redundant pairs include:

- Each and every
- First and foremost
- Full and complete.

When the first word in a pair has the same meaning as the second, choose one and delete the other.

- **1<sup>st</sup> Draft:** **Each and every** committee member is appointed by the Minister.
- **Rewrite:** **Each** committee member is appointed by the Minister.

### 4. Remove unnecessary adverbs

Adverbs describe verbs, adjectives, and other adverbs. They answer the following questions:

How?	Where?	When?	How Much?	How Often?
• Quickly	• Above	• Now	• Quite	• Always
• Carefully	• Here	• Later	• Fairly	• Never
• Slowly	• Away	• Already	• Very	• Normally

- **1<sup>st</sup> Draft:** He spoke **loudly** into the microphone.
- **Rewrite:** He spoke into the microphone.
  
- **1<sup>st</sup> Draft:** The policy analyst met with stakeholders for **almost** a year.
- **Rewrite:** The policy analyst met with stakeholders for a year.

### 5. Remove unnecessary adjectives

Adjectives describe nouns or pronouns. They answer the following questions:

What Kind?	Which One?	How Many?
• <b>Yellow</b> house	• <b>Last</b> week	• <b>Two</b> bus routes
• <b>Bumpy</b> road	• <b>This</b> city	• <b>Several</b> staff
• <b>Tall</b> tree	• The <b>second</b> day	• <b>Few</b> cars

Adjectives may stand in place of information. When possible, replace adjectives with data, dates, or quotes.

- **1<sup>st</sup> Draft:** The **exultant** Mayor proudly declared victory after the very last batch of votes was counted.
- **Rewrite:** The Mayor declared victory after the last batch of votes was counted at 6:30pm. He described himself as ‘proud to have the opportunity to serve’.

## 6. Remove unnecessary prepositional phrases

Prepositional phrases show the position of one thing in relation to the other. Examples include:

- At
- To
- In
- About
- For
- Of
- With
- Out
- Under
- By
- Within
- From

Unnecessary use of prepositional phrases interferes with the clarity of a sentence.

- **1<sup>st</sup> Draft:** The lack **of** any knowledge **on** the part **of** accountants **about** local conditions prevented determination **of** committee effectiveness **in** fund allocation **to** those areas **in** greatest need **of** assistance.
- **Rewrite:** Because the accountants did not know about local conditions, they could not determine how effectively the committee had allocated funds to the areas that needed assistance.

## 7. Follow *this*, *that*, *these*, or *those* with a noun

Writing words like “this” without a follow-up noun leaves readers hanging. When it’s not clear what “this” refers to, readers are left to fill in the blank.

- **1<sup>st</sup> Draft:** The Director will update **this**. (*This what?*)
- **Rewrite:** The Director will update this template.
- **1<sup>st</sup> Draft:** Staff want **that**. (*Want what?*)
- **Rewrite:** Staff want that submission schedule.

## Email Template: Submission Review Request

**Subject Line:** Review Request: [Name of Regulations] R&R Package

Hi [Name],

I am requesting your feedback on the [Name of Regulations] R&R package prepared by Service Nova Scotia and Internal Services (SNS-IS). Please find the R&R, drafting instructions, and communications plan attached.

If you have feedback, please leave notes on the attached Word documents and send them back to me. As an alternative, I am happy to speak with you over the phone.

Please do not sign the documents. I will prepare the final submission package after I receive feedback from all reviewers. Then, the final documents will circulate for signatures.

In order to meet the submission deadline, please send your feedback by [date]. And of course, if you have questions or require additional information, I am happy to be of assistance.

Warm regards,  
[Policy Analyst]

## Email Template: Submission Signature Request

**Subject Line:** Signature Request: [Name of Regulations] R&R Package

Hi [Name],

I am requesting your signature on the [Name of Regulations] R&R package. The final documents are attached in a zip file.

The first item in the zip file is your attestation statement. Your signature on this document signifies your approval of the R&R, communications plan, and routing slip.

To sign and submit your attestation statement, please follow the steps below.

1. Your attestation statement must contain the language in the template. It may be printed from your office or home computer.
2. If you do not have access to a printer, you may handwrite the text that appears on the attestation statement.
3. Sign and date the attestation statement. Your signature must be in cursive.
4. Take a picture of the signed attestation statement using a government-issued mobile device.
5. Email the picture to [Policy Analyst, email address] by replying to this email.
6. The picture will be submitted to Executive Council along with the R&R package.

Please contact me if you have any questions. I am happy to be of assistance.

Warm regards,  
[Policy Analyst]



# Attestation Statement Template

## Report and Recommendation to the Executive Council [Title of Submission]

### Attestation Statement: [Name], [Position], [Department]

I, [Name], [Position], [Department], approve the attached Report and Recommendation to the Executive Council entitled [*Title of Submission*], dated [Month] [Day], [Year].

.....

Signature of [Name], [Position], [Department]

.....

Date

## Writing Resources for Policy Writers

### 1. Government of Nova Scotia: Policy Standards and Submission Templates

#### [Corporate Administrative Policy Manuals](#)

The Management Manuals contain the corporate administrative policies and procedures applicable to Government departments, agencies, boards and commissions.

#### [100 Management Guide](#)

Documents the organizational structure of government and the delegation of responsibility to departments. This manual also outlines the Executive Council decision-making process.

*Chapter 3: Submissions to the Executive Council* contains information about standards for RFLs, R&R, and MECs.

#### [List of Forms](#)

Provides templates of the various forms required when preparing a Submission to the Executive Council as outlined in *Chapter 3: Submissions to the Executive Council*.

### 2. Service Nova Scotia and Internal Services: Electronic Submission Guidelines

#### [Executive Council and Treasury & Policy Board Submissions](#)

### 3. Writing Guides

#### [Purdue University: Purdue Online Writing Lab](#)

#### [The Writing Center, George Mason University: Writing Concisely](#)

#### [The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill: Writing Concisely](#)

#### [Research Degree Insiders: 10 Tips for More Concise Writing](#)

#### [Stanford Engineering: Stem Style Guide Technical Communication Program](#)

#### [University of Arizona: Writing Clearly and Concisely](#)